

The Reform of Popular Education, 1833-1870

Oliver HADINGHAM

While the mid-nineteenth century is commonly known as the Age of Reform, whether education needed reform, and if it did, how reform should be pursued, was an issue that divided contemporaries. Many argued education reform was a central plank of a wider reforming project, affecting the manners, aspirations and skills of all people, top to bottom. Reform should target the moral improvement of people as well as their ability to contribute to an expanding and prosperous society. Others maintained that if was necessary it would come organically, emerging from the schools themselves. An education was by no means a right, let alone one bestowed by the State. Ultimately it was - and should remain - a matter of parental choice. Even if some sort of reform was unavoidable, the British way was for change to come through compromise and concession over time, rather than a wholesale reform imposed by the State. Was it not the lesson of history that the British Constitution resembles a tree that had weathered the centuries remarkably well? Certain institutions may, on occasion, need a careful pruning, but to attempt more dramatic surgery would be to risk everything.

Educational provision in the early nineteenth century differed greatly in quality and scope. Broadly, three classes of people received three different types of education. Roughly speaking, what was taught and for how many hours of the day, and for how many years school was attended (if it was attended sporadically or even at all), was shaped by the kind of children the school catered for. The poor could attend private day schools and dame schools offering a basic level of elementary education, Sunday Schools focusing on Bible reading and scripture, Ragged schools and Industrial schools for the destitute, Reformatories for persistent young offenders, and factory

schools for millhands. The middle classes relied on old provincial grammar schools, newer private schools, and dissenting academies for those outside the Anglican faith. For the upper classes there were the old public schools. There was not very much 'public' about them: the name derives from the fact that originally the schools were grammars that provided places for poor pupils. Gradually fee-payers accounted for much of the intake, and they became staging posts for those destined for university, parliament or the Church. At all levels of education provision standards varied, there were good and bad schools, as there were good and bad teachers working in them.

It is necessary to provide a picture of the society in which such schools existed. The huge transformational impact of the Industrial Revolution, even though it was not as universal in its impact or extent, still wrought important and lasting change as the century progressed. The century also saw unprecedented population increase. The population had begun its period of sustained growth from the middle of the eighteenth century, with the years 1811-21 displaying a more dramatic increase. While the decline of disease such as small pox and plague, improved agricultural productivity, and better nutrition, may have had an influence on population increase, it is more likely that earlier marriage ages meant increased fertility and larger families (Thompson, 1988). In 1781 the population of the UK was estimated at 13 million; by 1851 it was 27 million (Harvie & Matthew, 2000). Britain was a very young country: under 24 year olds accounted for 60% of the total population during the first half of the nineteenth century (Hilton, 2006). This meant that vast numbers required education of some sort. Most did not receive much or any. Large numbers of people were moving to towns and cities to escape rural poverty, children among them. Birmingham and Sheffield had doubled in size by the 1830s, though Manchester, Liverpool, and Leeds grew even more impressively (Thomson, 1957, p. 12). The following decades saw continued urban growth, Bradford, for example, had grown from 13,000 to 104,000 from 1801 to 1851 (Hilton, 2006). Children had always been employed, and what learning took place was limited by the demands of work. Farming was dictated by the seasons, factory work was not. However, the image of the

dark satanic mills relying on mass child labour is mistaken: child factory workers accounted for only around 13% of the total factory workforce, some 26,000, a shocking figure by twentieth-first century standards, and many were shockingly treated, but they still accounted for only a fraction of children in what was a very young country (Thompson, 1988). The diversity of 19th century Christian belief was also a key feature of nineteenth century life, even though Anglicanism remained the official national religion, and revealed itself in the education offered. The repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 had extended the civil liberties of Dissenters, and the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1833 had allowed Catholics to become MPs, army officers, magistrates, and mayors. While Victorian society remained a religious society, doubt crept in too, thanks to the German Biblical scholars, Lyell's geological dating of the Earth's age, and Darwin's theory of evolution. and.

The wars against France during the Georgian period had served to bind society together in common struggle. The decades after Waterloo, however, were a restive period of riots, agricultural distress and financial crises. Social and political tensions were evident in 1816-20, and became more acute as parliamentary reform was debated during 1830-32 and Chartism simmered away throughout the 1830s and 40s. The 1832 Great Reform Act had extended the franchise to certain sections of the middle classes and done away with many electoral absurdities, but 82% of the adult-male population was still excluded. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century there emerged an awareness of the challenges facing the world's first fully industrialized nation, one more populated and urban than ever before. After the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846, signaling a shift from rural to urban priorities, and Chartism collapsed as a mass public movement, the economy entered a period of sustained growth and attention turned to the necessity of reform. Public education was indeed an emerging issue as Britain edged uncertainly towards a full democracy. Surely an industrial nation needed a workforce fit for purpose, but what sort of education should be provided and to whom? Particularly pressing was the issue of the 'lower orders', those

who found themselves in towns and cities without the communal ties of neighbour, land and lord that had for centuries framed existence in a predominantly rural nation.

Schooling for the poor

A substantial number of poor parents were either indifferent or downright hostile to schooling their children. Children were financial contributors to the family purse and should work from an early age was a given. Education beyond what was deemed strictly necessary was hardly contemplated by the labouring poor. Received opinion at the time maintained that educating the poor beyond basic literary and knowledge of scripture was to risk upending the social hierarchy and their god-given subordinate position. Sunday schools matched the task, as education was fundamentally a religious activity — Bible stories and basic knowledge of scripture being fundamental to a Christian temperament, a Christian temperament being fundamental to the duties and decorum expected of the poor — and did not jeopardize earnings in taking place on a Sunday. The Sunday school movement had emerged in the 1790s at a time when the lower orders were deemed susceptible to radical secular ideas emanating from revolutionary France. By 1831 Sunday school pupils numbered 1.5 million, and by 1851 some two thirds of young children were attending (Thompson, 1988). Children learnt Bible stories as well as the importance of cleanliness, punctuality and industry from Sunday school teachers often drawn from the local neighborhood. What had started as a middle class evangelist movement, the running and staffing of Sunday schools had gradually become more locally based and of its milieu (Thompson, 1988). The growth of the Sunday school movement — there were 23,135 Sunday schools operating in the 1840s, at the turn of the century there had only been 2,290 (Hilton, 2006) — is a reminder that religion remained tightly woven into the fabric of nineteenth century society, despite worrying signs that religious observance in large cities was waning.

Many children attended various kinds of elementary day schools, though not for long (a few hours a day) or consistently. Ragged schools took in

vagrant street children and gave them a free basic education, and fed and clothed them. In 1844 the Ragged Schools Union was founded with Lord Shaftesbury as its president. It relied on the support of philanthropists. By 1852 two thirds of the Ragged Schools were in London, though such schools existed in 42 towns, by 1870 London had 250, the provinces 100 (Sanderson, 1983, p. 21). The 1834 Poor Law guaranteed a basic education for those whose parents were in the workhouse, usually in purpose built workhouse schools. Many workhouse schools were of good quality. Dickens toured a London workhouse in 1850 and found the youngsters within its walls seemingly untouched by the otherwise bleak mood:

In the Infant school — a large, light, airy room at the top of the building — the little creatures being at dinner, and eating their potatoes heartily, were not cowed by the presence of strange visitors, but stretched out their small hands to be shaken with a pleasant confidence. And it was comfortable to see two mangy rocking horses rampant in a corner. In the girls' school, where dinner was also in progress, everything bore a cheerful and healthy aspect. The meal was over in the boys' school, by the time of our arrival there, and the room was not quite rearranged; but the boys were roaming unrestrained about a large and airy yard, as any schoolboys might have done. (1972, p. 87)

It was hoped that the workhouse schools would help steer children away from the sins of their parents, that such pupils would not return to the workhouse as adults. The Reformatory Schools delivered a much harsher form of education. The Reformatory Schools Act of 1854 stipulated that persistent lawbreakers would be sent away to schools, with their parents contributing to the cost of their sentence. Younger children who were in danger of falling into a life of crime were channeled into Industrial schools, established in 1857 with the passing of the Industrial Schools Act. The 1833 Factory Act obliged factory owners to provide free schooling for two hours a day to young workers on a regular basis, either within the factory or locally. This relied on a

sense of responsibility in mill owners to provide education. This was often lacking, with a corner of the factory set aside for 'lessons' given by an incapacitated worker. Yet in some cases, the mill owner took great pains to provide a decent education to their young workers. The inspectors were usually more concerned that mill owners were not breaking the statutory working hours for children than the actual quality of education provided (Young & Handcock, 1955)

Fee-paying was standard in other kinds of nineteenth century schools. Dame schools were poorly organized, often (but not always) as dirty and badly run as the novels of Dickens suggest, with many closer to child-minding establishments that freed up mothers for paid work. Children attended inconsistently, and classes would usually take place in a teacher's home. Voluntary schools run by religious bodies and funded from endowments or charity charged regular income from fees, usually two to five pence a week (Sutherland, 1990). The voluntary school sector offered in effect a subsidized education. Voluntary schools were run through the 'monitorial' system, whereby older boys were trained to oversee huge classes. Most schools in the nineteenth century were squalid places of harsh discipline and rote learning. Yet the harshness was not always as shocking to contemporaries: the home or work environment could well be just as unforgiving a place for children. Boys and girls were segregated at school from age five, and gender socialization was strictly enforced, little frowned on at the time as it mirrored the widely accepted division of labour within the wider society.

The children who regularly attended voluntary day schools were largely drawn from skilled working families, who were generally more eager that their offspring learned. Skilled workers, largely, though not exclusively, valued the importance of education, though wanted it to have practical (i.e. vocational) import, schooling as a means to a very definite end, a stepping stone to learning a trade, often the parent's. Social mobility was not a strong a desire. What may well have attracted such parents to compel their children to attend school regularly was the desire to retain and display a level of respectability often deemed lacking in those below.

The long road to state provision

Efforts to introduce educational reform in the early nineteenth century failed. Parliamentary bills to introduce rate-aided funding of education put forward by Whitbread (1806), Brougham (1820), and Roebuck (1833), were not passed. As Britain's population continued to rise through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, education began to be seen as something the state should at least monitor and, perhaps, under the right conditions, partially fund. Mass migration to towns and cities caused by population pressures was creating some anxiety; cut off from the network of duties and obligations existing in rural communities, the urban poor were a potentially subversive force that could threaten continued prosperity. The shadows of the French Revolution and fear of mass insurrection stretched well into the Victorian period. Only slowly did opinion shift from the need to keep the poor in a condition of what William Lovett termed 'mental darkness' to instilling a 'sufficient amount of mental glimmer' to ensure they remained poor but content with their rank and the obligations bound up with it (cited in Sutherland, 1990, p. 129). Kay-Shuttleworth, a key figure in education reform, like so many of his era, was aware that to neglect the education of the lower orders was foolhardy, lest they should turn subversive: "their misery, vice and prejudice will prove volcanic elements, by whose explosive violence the structure of society may be destroyed" (1970, p. 72). Poor children should be taught Christian morals that would encourage industry and virtue, deterring the young from a life of crime, insolence and fecklessness.

In 1833 the Whig government allocated £20,000 for the purposes of building new schools, shared between two voluntary educational societies, the British & Foreign School Society (1807, Church of England and Nonconformist) and the National Society for the Education of the Children of the Poor in the Principles of the Church of England (founded in 1811, Church of England). This was the first recognition of the state's responsibility towards education. By 1839 the National Society had built 700 schools, the British and Foreign Schools Society, 200 (Seaman, 1973). This grant was increased to £30,000 in 1839. (The very same year, £70,000 of public money was allocated

to the repair of the royal horse stables at Windsor Castle.) and a special committee was established to administer the grant and inspect the running of schools, with Dr James Kay, later known as Sir Kay-Shuttleworth, as secretary. The inspectors would report directly to the Privy Council Committee rather than the appropriate voluntary society, thereby establishing a degree of state control.

The grant system was a half-measure. The understanding was that a fully state-funded system overstepped the state's remit in an essentially private domain. Edward Baines, the MP for Leeds, spoke for many in saying that "in a country like this, freedom would ultimately produce higher education and higher moral character than any system which placed education under Government support and control" (cited in Heffer, 2012, p. 425). The voluntary societies retained certain powers over what was taught and who exactly taught it. The grant system upheld the natural organizational advantage of the Church of England in setting up and running schools as the national religion (Kitson Clark, 1962); by 1861 the National Society had almost 2.5 times the number of pupils in its schools than other dominations put together (Seaman, 1973). Treating all denominations equally was something the State strived for, lest it increase the bickering between the faiths.

Yet religion proved an obstacle to increased state involvement in other areas. Sir James Graham's proposal to parliament in 1843 of a reduction in the working hours of children working in factories that would free up more time to attend compulsory grant-aided trust schools was met with firm resistance from Dissenters, Catholics, and Quakers who objected to the proposed installation of an Anglican factory schoolmaster and heavily Anglican school management board. The Factory Act of 1833 meant that only children of eight years old and above could work in factories, and limited working hours of 8-13 year olds to eight a day, and that children should attend school for two hours a day, though enforcing this proved difficult. The subsequent Factory Act of 1844 further limited work to six and a half hours a day or ten hours a day for three days per week. Religious disagreements prevented an extension of the school day and delayed wholesale education reform. Robert

Owen's infant schools for his factories met resistance from his Quaker directors due to the secular focus of lessons.

A further progress on the road to a state-run system was the foundation of regional boards of education in 1846 with powers to inspect schools, levy rates, and examine pupils. The inspection system set up was extensive. By 1860, when a new Education Department took its place among other government departments in Downing Street, inspectors visited 10,403 schools and thirty-eight training colleges where 2,826 trainees were taught (Hurt, 1971). Trainee teachers would receive money from the state purse, as would the teachers responsible for training them. The setting up of a system of teacher training was a significant extension of the State's powers. To Matthew Arnold, inspector of schools, the pupil-teacher system represented "the sinews of our popular education" (cited in Young and Handcock, 1955, p. 831). The increased grant of 1839 had been intended for a central teacher trainer college, yet the voluntary societies failed to agree on an acceptable form of religious training so the plan was scrapped. Training colleges did exist, Kay-Shuttleworth had founded one in Battersea, the British and a Foreign Society ran the Borough Road College, and the National Society had St. Mark's college. By funding the training of teachers from 1846, the State had the means to establish common standards of teaching regardless of religious denomination, to support an education that could in time be more secular in emphasis, though 'non-sectarian' was the more palatable term.

Education reformers faced a hardened opinion still left over from earlier periods that the best way to educate the poor was to reinforce the state of ignorance and humble contentment that it was believed came natural to them. This belief became more strongly voiced as industrialization was sweeping away old ties of morality and deference, and the agitation of the 1830s and 1840s threatened the social order. Now the mid-century had been reached, the country had overcome the turbulent times and was basking in greater material prosperity and a feeling of national confidence. With Britain a more literate and politically engaged nation fuelled by the rise of periodicals and provincial newspapers and the spread of public libraries in towns

and cities, and with further franchise reform muted, the State could no longer willfully neglect the issue of popular education. Surely it was not, as Gladstone quipped, government policy to “restrain the circulation of intelligence” in society (cited in Heffer, 2012, p. 415). Many looked admiringly (and anxiously) at the strides Germany had made in ‘national efficiency’. The Prussian system of education might well be the guarantor of future national greatness, founded as it was on the idea of state-enforced compulsion that all children attend school. As Gladstone pointed out, victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 in part symbolized a “marked triumph of the cause of systematic popular education” (cited in Hoppen, 1998, p. 598). A growing consensus was forming that educating the poor was necessary and that state involvement of some kind was the only viable means of delivering basic universal provision of elementary education (Kitson Clark, 1962). At the same time, the potential of government to make a hash of intervention was widely feared (Heffer, 2012), and state control appeared decidedly unBritish. The emerging issue was whether the state could coax a more universal elementary school system into being through gradual reform and force of argument, while being sensitive to the role of religion within society, still large despite secularizing currents. The still privileged position of Anglian voluntary schools, which could draw on an ample largess in funding and housing schools as the official religious creed of the nation, was a contentious point. If religious teaching still had a role in schools, and if the state was overseeing education to an increasing degree, would it reinforce the position of the Church of England to the detriment of other denominations? In the population at large the Anglican Church competed, often poorly in certain regions, with various Non-conformist faiths like Unitarianism, Methodism, Congregationalism, and Baptism, together with a small but growing Catholicism from increasing Irish immigration. Non-conformism was slowly and grudgingly being accorded official recognition in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and dissenters were increasingly eager to be accorded a status commensurate with their numbers. From 1846 funding was made available to the Roman Catholic Poor School Committee, and grants could be used for

the maintenance of all schools receiving them. Yet a more religiously diverse society ensured education legislation was a particularly thorny issue for government throughout the remaining decades of the Victorian period.

In 1858 the Newcastle Commission was tasked with examining the state of popular education. Its report to parliament in 1861 started in a positive vein. The voluntary principle had in fact been almost as successful in getting children to attend schools as the Prussian system of state compulsion, and seemed to question the need for a more active state role in the provision of popular education. Indeed, the Newcastle Report celebrated the fact that a higher proportion of children attended school in England and Wales (1 in 7.7 of the population) than in Holland (1 in 8.11) and France (1 in 9). This was the latest advance of a series of advances: in 1803 the proportion was 1 in 17.5, in 1833 1 in 11.25, in 1851 1 in 8.36 (cited in Young & Hardcock, 1955). However, the Report also revealed that while government spending had risen over the decades, still large numbers of children were inconsistent school attendees and only 20% continued to stay at school after the age of ten, the age when children usually started to work. The imperative for children to work if the wages earned meant keeping the family from the workhouse or debtors' prison was acknowledged. The Report noted that standards were generally low with a vast number of pupils leaving school without a mastery of the basics (cited in Young & Hardcock, 1955). The Report recommended a concerted effort at raising standards so more children could master "the indispensable elements of knowledge, reading, writing, and the primary rules of arithmetic" but this goal should not lower overall standards of education (cited in Young & Hardcock, 1955). In terms of funding, the Report recommended State funding tied to attendance levels and efficiency, supplied through county and borough rates.

The much-revised 1862 Revised Code made the grants received results-related, the size of the grant given dependent on examination results in reading, writing and arithmetic. To its supporters minimum standards were a good thing, yet its detractors — teachers, inspectors, and the voluntary bodies wary of further state encroachment - claimed that the scramble for

results in the three Rs would increase the workload of already harried teachers and relegate true learning and the teaching of other unexamined subjects. The code was amended before being introduced in 1862, allowing some money to be paid despite bad exam results. The annual grant kitty had by the 1860s increased to £1 million, an impressive figure but insignificant compared with modern levels of education expenditure. Grants were allocated across 7000 schools with responsibility for 1.5 million registered pupils, 900,000 of which attended regularly (Thompson, 1988). This number was only half the total number of school age children, educated in other schools receiving no government grants, whether religious or private schools. By adopting a payment by results model the Revised Code effectively slashed the budget for building, training, pensions, and other special grants. This was met with derision: imposing blunt utilitarian principles on schools struggling to do a difficult job took no account of the difficulties many schools faced in functioning. As Arnold said, "A lame man walks ill and to make him walk better, you break his crutches." Poor urban boroughs were particular hard hit by Lowe's grant changes in being unable to rely on the public spiritedness and wealth available in more prosperous areas. In removing the need of inspectors to take into account the unique context of each classroom, Arnold stated, the payment by results system turned "inspectors into a set of registering clerks, with a mass of minute details to tabulate" (cited in Heffer, 2012, p. 425). At root, Arnold asserted, the Revised Code was symptomatic of "the selfish vulgarity of the upper classes, saying in their hearts that this educational philanthropy is all rubbish, and that the less a poor man learns except his handicraft the better" (Heffer, 2012, p. 428). Times were changing. The first half of the nineteenth century saw Britain remain a mixture of old and new, not quite as industrial as is often believed, nor quite as modern. By the middle decades of the century the country was edging away from the lingering remnants of Georgian society. There was a more distinctly 'national' mood emerging after the agitations and distress of the previous decades; a new secular faith in progress was forming, crystallized in the Great Exhibition of 1851, a celebration of progress and modernity. The

idea that industrial prosperity should be used for the greater good of the nation — all things in and of the nation — was now emerging. The State had a responsibility to develop the nation, to blunt its extremes and modernize Britain. An age of such material and technological improvement now expected a necessary improvement in the material conditions of the people, broadly understood. Education was becoming a national issue requiring some sort of national solution.

Much of the storm over the Revised Code was directed at its architect, Robert Lowe. Lowe was never a very popular person, and was generally characterized as an arch utilitarian, ready to reduce education to a crude utilitarian calculation of cost and benefits. Lowe was a natural outsider, an albino with extremely poor eyesight and a prickly temperament, that made him a formidable maker of enemies. The situation in England was more stubborn than he had experienced in his failed attempt to establish non-denominational schools during his eight years in Australia. There was growing discontent within parliament at the ever-expanding annual grant for what were, after all, voluntary bodies. There was also unease at Westminster that the government was becoming embroiled in a spat between the religious denominations, the only solution to which seemed an expensive state-imposed national system of education that was completely non-sectarian. The Revised Code was an attempt to chart a course through heavily mined water. A 'conscious clause' should be enforced on Anglican schools, Lowe thought, allowing children of other faiths to attend such schools without being subject to religious instruction and worship. Lowe's overall goal was to encourage more efficient teaching in linking grants to performance, while improved efficiency in teaching would produce higher standards of attainment among pupils. Lowe wanted a more rigorous role for the state and its inspectors. To determine school standards a basic test was needed which could be easily examined, and the three Rs provided this. Ultimately, Lowe's efforts were unsuccessful, he angered and alienated many and deprived struggling inner-city schools of vital funding.

Education is less an instigator of social change than a reflection of and

reaction to it. With the passing of the Second Reform Act in 1867, a widened franchise meant education of the poor became a more pressing concern. Robert Lowe, once so skeptical of state involvement, was now adamant that with a wider electorate, utilitarian principles should guide State's education policy:

I shrink from the notion of forcing education on people. It seemed more in accordance with our institutions to allow the thing to work and freely supplement the system. That whole question has now completely changed... This question is no longer a religious question, it has become a political one. It is indeed the question of questions; it has become paramount to every question that has been brought before us. From the moment you entrust the masses with power their education becomes an absolute necessity, and our system of education...must give way to a national system... You must take education up as the very first question, and you must press it on without delay for the peace of the country. (cited in Heffer, 2012, p. 412-3)

The secular solution to elementary schooling gained impetus from Joseph Chamberlain's National Education League, founded in 1869, and its campaign for a universal secular elementary school system. This was too much for some, who still saw a central role for religion in elementary education. W.E. Forster agreed, and included a conscience clause in his Education Bill to parliament in 1870, leaving the denominational make-up of the school to the decision of the local boards. This was altered as the bill made its way through parliament to only permitting religious teaching if it was distinctly undenominational, through a teaching of the Bible and scripture that was so generalized as to not cause offence. The 1870 Act, established school boards based on civil parishes in rural areas, and towns and urban boroughs. Each district would be assessed in terms of sufficiency (were there enough schools in the area), efficiency (was "a reasonable amount of secular instruction" given in the schools), and suitability ("from the absence of religious and other restrictions, parents cannot reasonably object"). If the inspectors found no

problems, the education board would be left alone. If problems existed, Foster declared, and it was by public inquiry that they would be ascertained, then it would be “by public provision that that need must be supplied” (cited in Young & Hardcock 1955, p. 913). This was a clear statement that the state would assert itself more readily.

Britain was a changed nation by the 1870s and the State was adjusting to new realities. Late Victorians were no longer quite so complacent as they had been at the nineteenth century’s midpoint. Nations like America and Germany may one day challenge British supremacy, and doubt and pessimism were seeping into the Victorian consciousness — would the nation be undone by the coming era of mass democracy and godlessness? Forster gave voice to this growing sense of urgency and unease:

We must not delay. Upon the speedy provision of elementary education depends our industrial prosperity... if we leave our work folk any longer unskilled, notwithstanding their strong sinews and determined energy, they will become overmatched in the competition of the world... if we are to hold our position among men of our own race or among the nations of the world we must make up the smallness of our numbers by increasing the intellectual force of the individual. (1955, p. 914-5)

The 1870 Act was not a Prussian-style State directive, however. Full state funding of elementary education was still seen as not the duty of government. The total cost of education would be drawn from three sources: the central government would supply a third from tax revenue, local boards would supply an equal amount through rates, and parents would continue to pay fees amounting to the remaining third of the total cost. Central government would have no direct control over the schools, local boards would regulate the schools and attendance would be enforced through the passing of a by-law at the local level. It was a parental duty to ensure a child was sent to school regularly. Forster’s Education Act was a significant step in the involvement of the State. Government spending on education was increasing:

in 1870 it accounted for 4.1% of government spending, in 1885 8.6% (Hoppen, 1998). The late Victorian state was edging further towards involving itself more fully in education provision, although its role continued to be supplementary and more one of overseeing education provision rather than controlling it. Indeed, even though 3692 board schools existed by 1883, the voluntary schools far outnumbered them — in 1883 there were 11,589 Anglican schools alone (Hoppen, 1998). The voluntary sector lived on until the end of the Victorian age. Yet the 1870 Act did signal the beginning of the end for private schools for the poor. Such schools remained popular for being much more of the community: homely places run by working people, quite unlike the regimented state-imposed and thus alien regime operating in the new board schools. From 1875 the state undertook steps to eliminate them, and by the century's end they were all but gone (Harrison, 1990). Private schools were from then the sole domain of those higher up, the middle and upper classes.

It is worth remembering that schools in poor areas, whether good, bad or indifferent, may have struggled to combat the influence of home and neighborhood, occupational culture and region. True compulsion to send one's children to school was felt patchily. The sanctions throughout much of the nineteenth century in avoiding school were so flimsy, and the economic necessity for children to earn their daily bread so vital. Children only attended school for four years at best, and often attendance was sporadic. From 1876 school attendance was enforced by truant officers roaming the streets of industrial cities, often meeting hostility that a child could be compelled to attend school even against the parents' wishes. It was surely another sign of a meddling officialdom, an authoritarianism imposed from above. To the poorest communities the state was an irrelevance, nothing more than a mischief-maker (Thompson, 1988). It was not until the 1880 Elementary Education Act that elementary school attendance was made fully compulsory throughout England and Wales up to the age of ten. School fees were not abolished until around 1890 (Anderson, 2012).

However, such measures may have been of less impact on attendance than

a growing feeling among most classes that a basic education was of value. The turbulence of the 1830s and 40s was replaced by relative social harmony by the time of the 1870 Act. Values of independence and self-respect were spreading among the labouring poor, well beyond the 1 in 10 that were the traditional holders of such values, the skilled artisans (Thompson, 1988). This expressed itself in numerous ways, the rise of friendly societies, the gospel of self-help promoted by Samuel Smiles, the disgrace that accompanied pauperism and the strong desire to avoid such a fate. Education, whether the self-education embarked on by increasing numbers of adults, or the more structured sort available for children at school, was seen a means of overcoming ignorance and error, and contributing to securing and retaining independence and self-respect, always a relative concept but a growing one. The school habit signaled social aspiration, a confirmation of respectability among the poor just as much as a tidy home and a cleanly-clothed family (Best, 1971). Improved social and economic conditions helped foster this growing respectability among the poor, in dragging many out of abject poverty, even if roughly 10-15% of the population still experienced a dire hand-to-mouth existence in slums, that may have been made more sanitary, but slums they remained. Cheap food, largely from Eastern Europe and North America, was banishing the 'hungry forties' to the realms of distant memory, factory legislation had curbed the harshness of working conditions, particularly those of children, the extremes of squalor and destitution that angered and unnerved so many in previous decades were blunted through a combination of public pressure, philanthropy and government effort. Progress on so many fronts had been achieved. The provision of popular education was one of them. The general view among contemporaries was that it was a measure whose time had come. If compelling the poorest to develop the school habit was viewed as intrusive, even oppressive, then so be it.

There was no question of schooling for the poor beyond the elementary school level just yet. The important thing was that education ready children to the demands of their social position, nothing more. The 1870 Act still reflected the idea that schooling for the poor should be more instructional

than aspirational. As HG Wells claimed in looking back on the 1870s, it “was an Act to educated the lower classes for employment on lower-class lines, and with specially trained, inferior teachers who had no university quality” (cited in Harrison, 1990, p. 200). To the Victorians, the lower reaches of the social hierarchy were essentially static. What concerned the Victorian reforming generation was raising the physical and moral condition of the lower orders as a whole. The poor needed to learn industry and orderliness for the sake of continued prosperity, the nation’s and their own, and the generalized Christian morality taught in schools would help an increasingly fast moving society cohere, a society so transformed in size and nature that it risked fracture. The reform of popular education between 1830 and 1870 represents a triumph of compromise between the parties involved, but also something more, a thoroughly worthy undertaking, to combat the rootlessness and squalor industrialization helped create by providing a minimal education for the poorest in society.

Conclusion

The goal of the mid-Victorian generation was “fashioning the elements of a new society in step with the appearance of its material and human components” (Thompson, 1988, p. 29). Compromise and adaption were the guiding themes. The movements made towards reform of elementary education were characteristically Victorian in representing an attempt at reconciling forces of continuity with discontinuity, in adjusting existing institutions to new demands. However imperfectly, the 1870 Act laid the foundations for the universal provision of elementary schooling. Reform was always incomplete and worked with the grain of existing social conditions and the prevailing mores of the time. Yet by the close of the nineteenth century the provision of popular education had been pretty much achieved through a combination of legislation, public awareness of the issue, and the dedication of well-meaning individuals working to teach the poor, to compel them to attend schools, to establish board schools where provision was sadly lacking as in city slums and mining communities. This was achieved not so much

through revolution as a series of piecemeal reforms applied to a stubborn issue. Of course, the twentieth century would see education more truly revolutionized: schooling for all to a much later age, largely in the state system of co-ed comprehensive schools, both reflecting and shaping a more meritocratic age. Public opinion was largely supportive of such changes. In contrast, the nineteenth century saw education less as a force for change than an instrument ensuring continuity. Victorians were broadly content that it should be so.

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